

Action on Ethos

An Achievement Culture

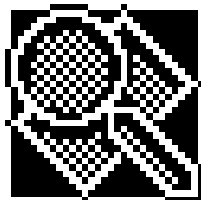
The pressure of multiple demands on schools can lessen or even destroy the pleasure of teaching, thereby ensuring that pupils' learning is not a positive experience either.

This Case Study describes how Hamilton Grammar School developed an Achievement Culture Initiative, starting from a teacher's paper, which enabled teachers to find constructive classroom strategies which offered

(1) a challenging learning environment,

(ii) increased involvement and interaction of pupils with each other and with teachers, and

(iii) rewards for high quality work and positive participation. Teachers found both short and long-term benefits both for their pupils and for themselves.



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1 Background

In 1996 Hamilton Grammar School embarked upon an initiative in positive teaching, one of several schemes aimed at building school ethos. It was called 'An Achievement Culture', and stemmed originally from a paper to SMT submitted by a member of staff in the Autumn of 1995. This was written one wet Saturday afternoon, the outcome of accumulated feelings about the need to rediscover the pleasures of teaching.

It was based on the following:

An achievement culture is the antithesis of a blame culture. In an achievement culture, only the positive is stressed; in a blame culture, the negative dominates. In the former, the individuals can experiment and venture out, participate without worry or fear, show initiative and have their opinions valued; there is an atmosphere of mutual respect. However, in a blame culture, creativity is stifled, there is preoccupation with criticism, individuals are under-realised, afraid to speak out and participation decreases. There is an atmosphere of suspicion and bullies can come to the fore. Achievement and blame cultures are common ideas, well enough recognised in adult life, particularly in the work place. But do they apply to the classroom? And, if so, is it possible to create an achievement culture by the adoption of some relatively simple strategies and a change of outlook? We wondered if teacher strategies adapted towards recognition of achievement could 'turn a class round'.

Some of the ideas ruffled feathers

- Don't use a red pen; it connotes failure to many children
- Take more time; the syllabus which can't be flexible is the tail that wags the dog
- Teachers tend not to provide a wide variety of lesson experiences, using mechanisms that they themselves preferred as learners or which they find more comfortable as teachers.

This paper was acceptable because the ideas were those of a colleague. It represented no official standpoint and was not handed down from on high.

2 Implementation

It took the then depute (now Head) to see in this simple paper the means for a worthwhile exercise within the school. The writer spoke to the school development planning group and was asked to come back with a re-draft framed as strategies or

one A Challenging Environment

- expect high standards in terms of attitude, effort and respect for others
- seek ways to encourage reluctant pupils to participate in activities
- set challenging work for all, matched to capabilities

two Involving the Young Person

- explain forthcoming activities frequently and simply
- explain 'achievement criteria' e.g. 'GRCs'
- inform parents of forthcoming learning
- ask pupils to set targets – quality targets and work completion targets
- offer choice of activities, purposes explained
- create teams or groups
- use competitive teamwork opportunities
- set activities which involve self and peer assessment

three Rewards

Praise

- praise high quality work, matched to capabilities
- praise participation

Criticism

- preface a negative with more than one positive remark

Correcting

- use non-red pen
- use stamps and stickers which imply belief in the pupil's subsequent performance

Audience

- promote performance to class
- send work home for parents' appreciation
- display work
- make sure there is enough time for work to be completed

actions which a teacher might try out. This was easily done, and about thirty interested staff were invited to take part. Each teacher was asked to select from a long list of actions those which were of interest to her or him. No minimum was stipulated, except that some from each of three areas were expected and they were not to be strategies currently in use.

The following were the three areas:

A **Challenging environment** was about respecting children's desire to learn by meeting their need for challenging and interesting experiences. It sought to combat non-participation and boredom. A few examples are given below:

Involving the Young Person came next, a larger field of concern. This sought to increase a pupil's own maturity and sense of responsibility about his or her learning and took in areas such as action planning and target setting. Many staff were unaware of the term 'Advance Organising' and were pleased to find that they had been doing it for years. Some strategies were aimed at creating dialogue between teacher and pupil (part of what we now call Interactive Direct Teaching)

Thirdly the idea of reward was explored. A well-used concept, certainly, in primary school, the writer felt that there were missed opportunities in secondary. There was also the risk of narrow definition – that reward was the same as praise – forgetting the value of Performance, Display, Product Completion, and other built-in rewards from the learning process. Stamps and stickers were especially recommended as teacher-awarded rewards.

3 Evaluation

The experiment was scheduled to last for a school session. It was not designed as a piece of research. It was taken for granted that more motivated pupils would learn better, so improved achievement was not the direct primary object of the exercise. The initiative was about pleasure in teaching and enjoyment in learning.

Signs of success would therefore be:

- teachers saying, 'I'm enjoying 1BL a lot more these days.'
- improved behaviour among pupils
- greater amounts of homework being done
- new techniques being adopted in the long-term as well as in the short-term
- quieter pupils starting to play a greater part in lessons

In short, success would be evidence of a happier ethos and greater participation and interaction of pupil and staff.

Teachers in the scheme enjoyed get-togethers at regular intervals. One of the benefits was that teachers were talking about how they taught. Hopkins (1997) noted this as one of the characteristics of a successful school. Video footage was shot of interesting classroom activities and played to the wider group. Good practice was shared in 'show and tell' sessions. We found that lots of departments were giving merit and endeavour certificates. People were saying 'I'm going to try that' or 'I do something similar.', and thus received a boost to confidence. We started to think of ways to allow teachers to observe colleagues from different departments teaching their subjects.

4 The Outcome

There were both immediate results and longer-term benefits:

At the time

Right away, people were talking to each other about how they taught. It mattered little that they might disagree; at least they were talking about it. One volunteer could not sustain the effort and bowed out saying, 'I can't do your achievement culture. It's not me.' However, nearly all teachers sustained their efforts. Our English department gave up their red pens and started using green ones. (Maths might take a little longer!) Several teachers discovered that even older pupils liked stamps and stickers. One of our students investigated this phenomenon with pupils as old as S4! He found that stamps and stickers increased the amount of homework done and concluded that rewarding pupils boosted their self-esteem and enabled them to believe that they could succeed in learning by themselves. Several teachers found that one particularly wearisome class changed completely; concentration and effort greatly improved, pupils started to

support one another, homework was done better, and the quieter, highly able pupils, who had earlier 'kept their heads down', started to show some leadership. One boy also changed completely, from being a trouble maker into one who wanted his teachers' approval. We also asked the pupils if they noticed any differences. Many did, and rated them highly, using remarks such as, 'yeah Mrs. Smith's class is well cool now!' They liked being encouraged and being consulted about learning. More able pupils saw that some of their work was harder and more challenging.

The present day

In the three years that have passed, many more initiatives have been used, including the on-going use of the SOEID Performance Indicators, and it is therefore impossible to prove how far current practice is associated with the Achievement culture Initiative. However, there have been direct results:

- We have a new Learning and Teaching Policy, a direct descendant of the Achievement culture, studded with terms like Challenge, Involvement of the Child, Self-Esteem and Reward
- Today, we are putting finishing touches to our new Behaviour System in which we have been careful to stress the importance of fostering good behaviour as well as dealing with bad behaviour – it incorporates a 'best class' incentive system
- Many teachers, and sometimes whole departments, are using stamps, stickers, awards and certificates as a matter of course – some of these certainly date from the initiative, and the notion that older pupils still have the need for these simpler forms of encouragement was very much a positive finding albeit unexpected
- Some of the staff involved three years ago have moved on to other schools, but, of those who remained, we recently asked the question: 'Have you been changed at all by the achievement culture?' Several answered affirmatively, in terms of both their classroom practices and their attitudes. One teacher said, 'Absolutely. I now believe that I will not have any effect on a pupil if I haven't formed a relationship with him or her – one of mutual respect and trust, and this colours all my work today.'

For those involved, it was fun. There was and still is a buzz about the place. People enjoyed it, it brought them together and pleasure in teaching and learning rediscovered or enhanced. At the end of the day, is this not what a positive school ethos is about?

Reference:

Hopkins, D. (1997) 'Improving the quality of teaching and learning. *Support for Learning*, 12 (4)

Some Further Explanations:

Expectations

With the right expectations...

A teacher can then express satisfaction at everyone's achievement, initiating a positive cycle of success, breeding enhanced self esteem, then confidence in participation which, in turn, improves motivation and leads to further achievement. The teacher has more job satisfaction, less stress and communicates ease to pupils.

Challenge

...Children cannot derive satisfaction from their learning activities if they are too easy.

Advance Organisers

... A complicated sounding term for simple approaches which allow pupils to know what lies ahead, both in a lesson and over a series of lessons. It is important for pupils to know the plan laid out for them if they are to set themselves targets.

Teamwork

... Often we complain about the potency of peer pressures when it is negative; here peer pressure can be harnessed for the positive; it is very hard for a child with low self-esteem to 'switch off' when team mates rely on him or her.

Varied Activities

...To be avoided at all costs is a classroom regime grounded in the same learning activity; self-paced doing of worksheets, or self-paced working through page after page from books.

Formative Assessment

...Pupils must be able to see progress. The best form of assessment is dialogue – where the teacher simply sits down and discusses progress with the pupil, shaping future plans together.

Product

...To a child of 12 or 13, a product is tangible and concrete. It is easier for him to feel successful by creating something – artwork, a model, artefact, story.

Processing

...When teachers ask whole class questions and only accept responses from a few children who put their hands up, only those who answer are known for sure to be processing the learning.

Listeners may be processing, but if they answer orally or in some other way, we know they are processing learning.

Praise

...Research shows that it takes many occasions of praise to counteract one occasion of criticism.



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Case Study 20
Hamilton Grammar School